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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAMAKO 000415

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SUBJECT: RUNNING ON FUMES: MALI'S SOLDIERS EXPOSED IN THE
DESERT

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Mary Beth Leonard, Embassy Bamak
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for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1.(C) Summary: After a fierce firefight on June 15 with elements of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in the area of Tin-Adema, approximately 180 kilometers west-southwest of Tessalit, the Malian military forces involved soon found themselves immobilized in the desert for several days, awaiting reinforcements and resupply. Although reprovisioning has allowed limited patrols to be conducted in the area of Timetrine, the pause in Mali's operation testifies to the logistical limitations facing their anti-AQIM efforts, and the critical nature of Mali's lack of military support infrastructure in the country's desert north. While the Malian forces literally sat out of gas in the open desert, Embassy sources indicated that AQIM elements were freely on the move in the border regions. The Malian operation against AQIM is a major step for the Malian government, and should be speedily supported morally and materially. End Summary.

Resolute but Hamstrung

2.(C) On June 15, two company sized task forces of Malian soldiers, accompanied by Arab Berabiche militiamen, demonstrated the resolve of the Malian government to take on the forces of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) by pursuing and successfully engaging AQIM elements in the area of Tin-Adema, approximately 180 kilometers west-southwest of Tessalit. The Malian forces, numbering perhaps 100-200 men, lacked sufficient diesel fuel and supplies to continue the pursuit, however, and remained in the Tin-Adema area for at least a week awaiting resupply. During that time, according to some Embassy sources, AQIM elements began moving freely across the desert. Although fuel and supplies eventually arrived and the Malian forces have resumed limited patrols in the area of Timetrine, opportunities were lost and it is unclear how sustainable the renewed push is, given the logistical difficulties involved in supplying a military force in this isolated and harsh terrain, with the limited transport available to the Malian government.

Just two barebones bases, both in poor condition

3.(C) The Malian military has only two major bases in the region of Kidal. The nearest to the Malian troops in Tin-Adema is four to six hours away in Tessalit, and that facility is limited and in need of expansion and repair. The Tessalit base consists of a degraded landing strip, a few dilapidated barracks and metallic and adobe structures. Its defensive capabilities are virtually nonexistent, located in open and exposed terrain with only a primitive perimeter

fence as a barrier to entry. While the Kidal base, 12-24 hours from Tin-Adema via an unpaved road and a dry river bed, is a larger walled structure with a greater number of barracks and facilities, both bases are isolated from logistical supplies and reinforcements, which must arrive via convoy from Gao, a two day trip over unpaved road.

Exposed to 100 degree Sun and Sitting Ducks

4.(C) Embassy sources believe that the Malian soldiers in Tin-Adema and patrolling in the area of Timetrine are without cover and are not quartered in any structure, although the average high temperature in the region of Kidal during June is 104 degrees Fahrenheit. Even troops posted to the desert on three month tours habitually have no shelter or facilities and rest under their trucks. The Algerians donated a planeload of tents and sleeping bags to the Malian Army in early May, but sent them to Bamako leaving it to the transportation-poor Malian Army to get the material back up north. It is doubtful that any of those supplies have been successfully transported to Kidal yet. In addition to exposure to the harsh desert conditions, Malian forces face the clear possibility of life-threatening reprisal attacks for which they have no cover or defense. The Embassy's DAO reports that the Malian soldiers have laid anti-personnel landmines around their positions as their only protection against ambush.

Unfamiliar with the North and ill-trained

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5.(C) Although Tuaregs and Arabs are represented in sizeable numbers in the National Guard, the Malian Army is overwhelmingly made up of soldiers from southern Mali. To the best of the Embassy's knowledge, soldiers posted to duty in the desert north are sent to either Gao, Kidal, or Tessalit for three to six month tours without any training to introduce them to fighting - or surviving - in the harsh desert terrain. Indeed, during the recent rebellion of Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, some Malian soldiers were placed on duty in the north never even having fired a weapon, due to lack of resources, notably ammunition, during training.

Comment: More than just Gas

6.(C) Mali's current offensive against AQIM represents a major undertaking for the Malian government, and has been taken at considerable risk. It reflects a genuine commitment on the part of the Malian government to confront terrorism, but is limited by Mali's lack of resources and the very real logistical difficulties posed by operating in isolated and expansive desert environments. Mali's long term goal of securing northern Mali requires a more permanent security force presence than Mali's northern military infrastructure can currently support. Mali has no defensible outposts in northern Mali outside of the major cities, which necessarily means that each military operation in pursuit of bandits, terrorists, or rebels invariably exposes Malian forces to harsh desert terrain and limits their resupply. This isolation and exposure is exacerbated by the lack of adequate training to teach Malian soldiers to survive and fight in such an environment. If Mali is to secure its northern regions, its military support infrastructure will have to be expanded, and training will have to be improved. Since Mali's recent offensive against AQIM is a positive step forward responsive to long-standing international community expectations and consistent with American interests, Mali's efforts should be supported both morally and materially.

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